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THE GROWTH OF METHUEN.

A paper read before the Methuen Historical
Society by Joseph S. Howe.

I am sorry that no one is prepared with a paper to read to us tonight on some subject relating to the past. It may be that we attempted too much when we tried to have an elaborate historical paper at each of our monthly meetings. The field for us is necessarily limited in extent, although there are many subjects of interest which might be profitably investigated. I find upon inquiry among other historical societies that few, if any, have as frequent meetings as we have had, or an essay at each meeting. We have talent enough in our Society, but members have not the time to spare which is necessary for the preparation of an elaborate paper on any historical subject.

In the absence of anything better, I have thought it might be interesting to occupy a few moments in a review of the events and changes which have been taking place in our town in the recent past.

Since our last regular monthly meeting the Historical Society has had no

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meeting or excursion such as we have so frequently talked about. The Society however, had a rather informal invitation from the Topsfield Historical Society to visit Topsfield on July 27th with the Essex Institute, and other historical societies of the county. The morning was unfortunately cloudy and threatening, so that but fifteen members of our Society responded to the invitation. Those who did so were well repaid.

The trip through the country on the electric is a delightful one, and to most of us was new. Topsfield is a typical old New England town, set among the hills, occupied mostly by farmers, with here and there the dwelling of some well-to-do city resident who has chosen Topsfield for a summer home. It was one of the earliest settled towns in Essex County and we were shown one house which was built before the Indians ceased to be troublesome, and when it was necessary to build the houses with reference to defence. The forenoon was occupied by those who reached the town in season, in visiting places of interest. In the afternoon a meeting was held in the town hall. About every historical society in the county appeared to be represented. We Methuenites did not arrive until nearly noon, so that we did not have an opportunity to see many of the interesting places in the town.

The meeting in the town hall was presided over by Hon. Robert S. Rantoul of Salem, President of the Essex

Institute, and the addresses were made by distinguished literary and scientific men and women, and were of an unusually high order.

Mr. Rantoul, in his opening address, told us about the early history of Topsfield, and how it was in the past one of the most important towns in the county. Some of us know that Topsfield was more frequently mentioned in early history than most other towns in Essex County, but few of us knew why, until we heard his explanation. The geographical centre of Essex County is near the hall where the exercises were held. The Newburyport and Boston turnpike runs through the town a little east of the village, and the old Salem turnpike,—I believe it was called—runs a mile or two south. In old times the stage lines between Newburyport and Boston ran on the Newburyport turnpike, and from this part of the county to Salem on the Salem turnpike, intersecting in or near Topsfield.

There was a famous tavern in Topsfield near the intersection of these two roads, so that Topsfield was the most accessible and central place for county meetings before the days of railroads. People could drive to Topsfield from any part of the county and return the same day, or they could easily reach it by stage. Hence the old tavern in Topsfield became the place where many of the county meetings, political and otherwise, were held. I think that nearly all such meetings were held at Topsfield or Ipswich.

Mr. Rantoul told us of several important and educational movements which were organized at Topsfield, and, in this connection, we Methuenites were proud to hear him name Methuen. He told us that among the important movements which have originated in Essex County the Lyceum system, which for many years had such a wide spread influence over the country, had its inception in Methuen, and received its first impetus from a county society which was organized at Topsfield by representatives from the different towns in the county. Very little is known of the old Lyceum in this town, and this society can do no more important work than to ascertain what can now be learned of the beginnings of a system which has had such a far-reaching influence, and whose origin here is an honor we ought to claim. I will not speak of the other addresses, which were valuable and interesting, and will only say that we returned home rejoicing in a day well spent.

Since our last meeting the event which has caused the deepest sorrow to the people of Methuen was the death of David Nevins, the last male member of the family which has done so much for this town. This building, the fine library in the adjoining room, the fund with which the Memorial has been endowed, the magnificent memorial to Henry C. Nevins at the stone church, will make the name a household word in this town for all coming time. Few towns have had a gift so valuable and so well planned

for the future as the Nevins Memorial. The elegant grounds, every tree in which was selected and set by Henry C. Nevins, whose practised eye was never at fault in such matters, will always delight the eyes of every one fond of the beautiful in nature. This building is one of which any town or city may be proud. And the management of the magnificent fund with which the whole is endowed is so wisely planned that so far as human foresight can perceive, the inhabitants of the town are secure in the continuance of the whole for an indefinite future. Surely the people of this town, now and for all coming time, owe a debt of gratitude to the Nevins family, which will be more and more appreciated as time goes on.

I do not know what items of historic interest may have been gathered up during the summer by members of the society, but hope there have been many. One fact has come to my notice which is of some interest, and that is that the parents of Thaddeus Stevens, who was so prominent in national politics a few years ago, once lived in this town. There was a rumor, about the time of his death, that his ancestors once lived here, but nothing certain was known about it. But a few weeks ago I received a letter from Congressman Samuel McCall, saying that he was writing the biography of Thaddeus Stevens, and wishing me to ascertain what could be learned about his parents, who were said to have lived here. An examination of the

old tax books disclosed the fact that the father of Thaddeus Stevens lived here until within a year or two of the birth of Mr. Stevens, when he removed—as Mr. McCall says to the state of Vermont. So it seems that Methuen just missed being the birthplace of the “Great Commoner.”

The changes which are taking place in Methuen we hardly perceive, so gradual are they, but the future historian of the town will discover that it is now passing through a period of remarkable growth. To get a clear idea of just what is happening, we will make the best survey we can of the past five years. And first as to population. The assessors' statistics, and the state census, taken in 1895, furnish the only data in existence for that period. It is therefore impossible to know the exact number of inhabitants except in the years when the state or national census is taken. But a pretty close estimate may be made from the number of poll tax payers as ascertained by the assessors in each year. The ratio of poll tax payers to the total population was almost exactly the same under the national census in 1890, and the state census in 1895.

The population of Methuen in 1890 was 4814, and in 1895, 5690. The number of assessed polls in 1890 was 1259, in 1895, 1495, and in 1898, 1839; in the census years almost four inhabitants to an assessed poll. Estimating on this basis, we had a population on May 1st of this year, of a little over 7000, a gain of more than

1300 in three years. Methuen is now the fifth town in population in Essex county, the larger towns being Amesbury, Danvers, Marblehead and Peabody. The number of dwelling houses has increased from 905 in 1893—five years ago—to 1179 in May of 1898, a gain of 274 dwelling houses in five years. I think there is no doubt that there are now more than 1200 dwelling houses in the town.

This increase has not been confined to any one section of Methuen, but has been greatest in the west part of the village, the Arlington District, and on the lines of electric road in both ends of the town. The demand for house lots has led to the laying out of many new streets, whose very names are as yet unknown to us, and house lots enough, if everyone was built upon, to comfortably accommodate the people of a city of twenty thousand inhabitants. The number of school children has increased in the five years from 936 to 1266, a gain of 330, enough for eight schools of 40 scholars each.

Another indication of growth is in the increased number of dogs; 290 were licensed in 1893, and 351 in 1898. So it would seem that the increase of dogs does not keep pace with the increase in population; a curious fact which will probably be variously accounted for, according to the different degrees of love or hatred which a person has for the canine race.

The property of the town has materially increased in the past five years,

but probably not in quite the ratio of population. The valuation in 1893 was \$3,396,345 and in 1898, \$4,104,108—a gain of \$707,763 in the five years. When we consider that no large business enterprise has been located in the town within that time, and that most of the new comers are working people of small means, I think the gain is quite as much as could reasonably be expected. It is doubtful if the farming interests of the town have on the whole developed much. Some of our most prosperous farmers are doing more than ever, but the number of such is small, and more than offset by those who are doing less.

The number of horses in the town in 1893 was 742, in 1898, 780; an increase of 38. This probably only indicates that horses are used less than formerly, and has no bearing on the amount of business done. Farmers, doubtless, use as many horses as ever. The number of cows in town in 1893 was 1233, and in 1898, 1154, a decrease of 23. In 1890 the number was 1363,—214 more than on May 1st of this year. Whether this decrease is due to the fact that farmers think that but little money can be made in making milk, or whether the stringent laws which have been enacted in recent years to regulate its production and sale, have produced this result, I will not attempt to say. It is a singular fact, that a large increase in the demand should be accompanied by a decrease in production.

The vital statistics of the town, afford many points of interest, a few of which I will mention.

The number of births in the past five years has been as follows : 1893, 134 ; 1894, 111 ; 1895, 157 ; 1896, 179 ; 1897, 187. It will be seen that the number of births in the different years has probably increased at about the same rate as the population of the town. One would suppose that the birth rate would vary greatly in different years, but on the contrary it is surprisingly uniform.

A scarcity in the annual crop in one part of the town, is always made up by an extraordinary yield in some part.

The marriages in the town are not uniform in number as will be seen. The number in 1893 was 59 ; 1894, 56 ; 1895, 52 ; 1896, 57 ; 1897, 71. The number this year will be some less than last year. It is said, that other things being equal, marriages vary in number with the prosperity of the times ; it is certain that in this town at least, they do not increase in the ratio of the increase in population. The number of marriages last year, in proportion to population was in excess of any year since I have had the custody of the records ; and yet the times were not very prosperous and it did not seem to be a good year for marrying. I am inclined to think that the natural laws which regulate marriages, are too subtle and mysterious for any "fellow to find out."

The deaths in the town for the past

five years have been as follows: 1893, 101; 1894, 91; 1895, 107; 1896, 110; 1897, 103. It will be seen that the total number of deaths in a year was not much increased in the five years, although there was a large increase in population. This means a diminished death rate. For the five years previous to 1893 the number was as follows: 1888, 88; 1889, 85; 1890, 124; 1891, 92; 1892, 125.

What is the cause of this diminished death rate? The water works were put in operation in the fall of 1894. The average number of deaths per annum for the five years preceding the introduction of water was almost exactly the same as the average since we have had the water. The death rate in 1890 was upwards of 25 per thousand. In 1895 about 19 per thousand. In 1897 about 15 per thousand. Whether this diminished death rate is due to the introduction of water, or to an accidental freedom from deadly epidemics, or to increased skill of our physicians, can be better determined in the future.

Certain it is that the death rate of Methuen is below the average. It thus seems probable that the most important result of the introduction of water, has been the better health of the people of the town. It would be interesting to know of what nationalities our new townspeople are made up, but there is no way of finding out. It is generally supposed that a very large proportion are of foreign birth, mostly

English and German and Canadian, with a small sprinkling of almost every European nation. Most of them are working people, many of whom own their homes, and are temperate, thrifty and industrious. I do not think the number of paupers has increased in proportion to the increase in numbers. I think, too, that the number of foreign-born newcomers is probably over-rated. The only means of forming any opinion on that matter, that I know of, is from the additions to the check list.

The number of new voters registered the present year, 1898, is 189, and a larger proportion of naturalized citizens were registered this year than ever before. Of this number 104 or 55 per cent. were native-born Americans, 57 or 30 per cent. were English, 14 or about 8 per cent. were German, 8 or 4 per cent. were Canadians, 4 or 2 per cent. were Irish, 1 Norwegian, 1 Austrian. Probably this does not fairly represent the proportion of new residents of foreign birth, but it shows who are becoming voters, and also that a goodly number of Americans are taking up their abode in Methuen. The causes of this phenomenal growth, which has recently been going on, are not far to seek. There has been no great industry established here calling for a large number of workmen, but there can be no doubt that the expansion of business in the Arlington mill, just over the line in Lawrence, has had much to do with it. Our fine water system,

which has probably few equals in the State, has doubtless been another cause of growth. To these two causes must be added the electric roads running through the town, which make it easy for people doing business or working in Lawrence, to have a home in the country, where land is cheap, and the surroundings pleasanter than in the crowded streets of the city. The question whether this rapid growth is to continue is not easy to answer, but I think we may reasonably expect a steady increase in wealth and population for a long time to come. Methuen is, doubtless, destined to be mainly a residence town, which is the best kind of a town to live in. There are several things which must, in the long run, exert an important influence.

Our water system, already mentioned, will be an important factor in the future prosperity of Methuen. It is one of the best in the State, and I ought to say, in passing, that its establishment has been one of the most successful and important enterprises of the past five years. There are now nearly 900 water takers, a number far exceeding the anticipation of the most sanguine advocates of the introduction of water, and consequently the income is greater, and burden upon the taxpayers less, than was anticipated. One of the speakers at Topsfield said that a person seeking a place in which to make his home would judge the character of a community by three things:—the character of the roads, the quality of the schools, and the manner in which the cemetery are

kept. Judging by this standard Methuen is a most desirable place to settle in. Our roads have attained a very enviable reputation within the past five years. Methuen has, now, a dozen or fifteen miles of streets not excelled in any town of its size in the State, and not equalled in the county. In road making we are furnishing an object lesson to the cities and towns around us.

Last year I attended a meeting at Salem of the officers of the towns and cities of the county, called together by the State Highway Commission to discuss the subjects of roads and road-making, and was greatly pleased to hear one of the town officers from the eastern part of the county, in a speech favoring an improved system of road-making, say "we want better roads, such roads as Methuen has." Now this system of road-making, which we have entered upon with such success and for which we really deserve great credit, cannot fail to have an important influence on the future of our town. Our schools are kept well up to the standard, and our old burial grounds, thanks to a public spirited citizen, have been put in perfect condition, and are models of neatness.

But some one will remind me of things we lack and say that we are behind other towns in the matter of sidewalks, sewers, electric lights, etc. The answer to that is, that we should be judged by what we have, rather than by what we have not. The public spirit of a town or city is to be judged by what they are willing to contribute

for the public benefit. In other words, by the taxation, they are willing to impose on themselves for desirable public works. I believe that, hitherto, this town has taxed itself as heavily as it ought for public improvements, and that the money has been spent as judiciously on the whole, as can be expected in any municipality. Methuen is not a rich town. We have been blessed with a few very wealthy citizens, who have spent their means with a lavish hand for improvements, which the poorest citizen can enjoy as well as the most wealthy. But the great majority of our people have small means. There are very few of what may be called moderately wealthy men. The rate of taxation which we have imposed on ourselves is greater than the average in the State, and I contend that this is the true measure of our public spirit. If we lack some things we much desire, it is because we cannot yet afford to have them.

But after all, Methuen will be distinguished in the future for attractions which none of us would have dreamed of twenty years ago. We should not then have believed that the town would ever be noted for containing some of the masterpieces of the most famous painters and sculptors of our time, and yet this is an accomplished fact.

Nature has done much for the surroundings of this village, but within the last few years the region around this building, and about "Whittier's Hill," including the grounds of Mr. Searles, has been transformed by the art of the landscape gardener and the

exquisite taste of the proprietors of the grounds, into a scene of beauty which is equalled in few, if any, places in the country. And I suspect that the masterpiece of Mr. Ball—as I believe he regards it—which our munificent fellow-citizen has just placed in position, is in itself sufficient to make Methuen famous and to immortalize the name of him who had the means and the inclination and appreciative taste to enable the distinguished artist to embody his conception in bronze and stone for the admiration of this and future generations. Already the lovers of the beautiful in nature and art are coming to Methuen, as the faithful Moslem visits Mecca. It requires no great stretch of imagination to believe that a hundred years hence lovers of art will flock hither from distant places just as they now visit the old world to see the great works of the old masters, and the town will be famous for containing some of the best specimens of the work of Ball, LaFarge, St. Gaudens and other great artists. Our town is every year becoming more and more attractive. The unsightly old buildings one by one disappear. A few, perhaps, ought to remain as relics of the old times.

Just now we are seeing the old hotel transformed by the skill and taste of its owner into a tasteful structure, which beautifies the square. All these improvements must have their influence to make the town more desirable to live in, and to draw hither a community of refined and cultured people.

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